

**Opening Statement
Chairman Dan Burton
Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere
Committee on International Relations
November 9, 2005**

**Oversight Hearing: The Illicit Drug Transit Zone in
Central America**

We are pleased to have two distinguished panels from the U.S. government and the Colombian Navy to take a closer look at the problems, challenges, and hopefully some solutions to the Central American drug trafficking transit zone.

The streets of America are awash in drugs and have been for some time. More than ever before, greater volumes of illicit drugs from Colombia, and the Andean region, are transiting into Central America, Mexico, and on into the United States. The Central American Transit Zone is being exploited like never before and a congressional review of policy options to fix the transit zone gaps is underway. We must keep our eye on the ball, work smarter to stem the flow of illicit drugs.

In response to 9/11, many of the military maritime and air assets in the drug transit zone were taken out of the interdiction business and committed to counter-terrorism and homeland security. This often leaves us **with more actionable intelligence on drug**

shipments than assets to intercept them. If one looks at the massive likely drug tracks we have on the chart here, and an analysis of how many of them we in fact intercepted, you quickly grasp the gravity of the problem.

Whether it is a lack of Marine Patrol Aircraft (MPA) or critically needed helicopters to intercept these drug flights or disable the drug laden “Go-Fast Boats,” today we often find ourselves with no assets to act, and we can only watch as the deadly drugs make their way into our country. It is a tragedy that will cost us much more in crime, health care, lost wages, and destruction of our cities and communities, than if we fixed the transit zone gaps, sooner rather than later.

Despite all of these problems our military services, the DEA and Colombian partners, like the Colombian Navy and National Police, fight on, and do what they can with the limited resources that they have. As an example, the Colombian Navy is approaching a record year of 100 tons in cocaine seizures.

The Congress has not been idle. We have been working hard to find solutions like our committee’s proposed DC 3 aircraft for the Colombian Navy’s MPA use, or Chairman Mark Souders’s effort to get an oiler tanker for refueling our maritime assets in the Eastern Pacific.

We will also be asking hard questions today on whether we are fully utilizing all the equipment and counter-drug assets we have already put into the region. Why for example, are 11 Colombian National Police (CNP) helicopters in Santa Marta on the coast of the

Caribbean, not able to fly at night, *when 95% of the illicit drug shipments are transiting at night?*

Our hearing today will challenge all of us to get the illicit drug transiting problem back on the front burner, so that it gets the attention and assistance it needs to fill the role the American people want the federal government to do effectively: Keep illicit drugs out of the United States.

The testimony we hear today may also help broaden our understanding of the nexus between narcotics trafficking and the threat of terrorism. The spike in narcotics shipments via Central America we ignore at our own peril, as they too could also be carrying deadly terrorists, or suicide bombers, who mean us as much harm as the narcotics traders.